



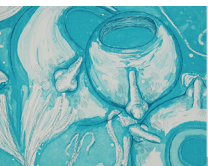
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**ECOFEMINISM REINTERPRETED: COVERING THE PIECES SUNK AND WASTED**

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Mother Earth is not a new concept. In fact, She's a terrible cliché. The paradox of dear Mother Earth is that She is simultaneously caricature and desensitized environment, a space to be harvested and managed by mankind. However, these two concepts – Mother Earth and environment – while seemingly referring to the same Thing, have a key difference. "Mother Earth" is represented as a female body. The everyday use of rhetoric all around us personifies the environment as a defenseless female form, being polluted and abused.

Whether She nurtures or is violated, it is Mother Earth as a created *female* subject, described with a *female* body, that is being constantly reimagined and romanticized. "Everywhere, the cult of the romantic is elbowing 'humanity' to take pity on poor, ideal 'Mother Nature.'"<sup>1</sup> In our own time, Facebook activism seems to be where "the environmental and ecology movements have been expanding and updating their library of romantic images and metaphors."<sup>2</sup> This newfound horror at oil spills, melting ice caps, or each name in the extinct species list is couched in the language Heller describes: another female body being violated. And yet, especially poignant is not just how the complete feminization of the environment has occurred, but at the staunch insistence of how "Lady Nature"<sup>3</sup> is posed in contrast to our own aggression and choice to extract and pollute, something decidedly masculine in the scholarly community.

I wish to further complicate understandings of the Mother Earth subject through a visual exploration of my own work. It is not simply through the created objects themselves that Mother Earth can be investigated, but also through the physical techniques of the art-making process – something all too often neglected within theoretical frameworks. This mistakenly relegates art-making practices to the domain of being completed with a created object, disconnecting art-making from larger systems of infrastructure, capital, and social development that it continually functions in and with. I not only wish to remedy this grave error, but offer a new perspective on our dear Mother Earth. Highlighting the connections between the printmaking process and Mother Earth shifts the focus from the art object<sup>4</sup> to a more holistic understanding of the metaphysical framework that the artist employs while creating.

Printmaking is one area where there is no simulacra: Each reproduction is in fact "real" and original, while at the same time referring intrinsically to the other reproduced prints in the edition. Even here, the word *reproduction* implies that there is one original that the simulacra pretend to mimic. The ability to be mass produced and distributed while still retaining the truth or originality in each print is what printmaking can provide ecofeminism.

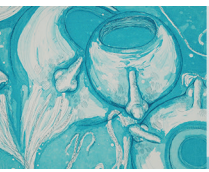
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1. Chaia Heller, "For the Love of Nature: Ecology and the Cult of the Romantic," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, and Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1993), 219.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. By "art object," I mean a created object by an artist with the intention of it being recognized as a final art product.



I use printmaking to examine Mother Earth as an environment of waste, an assemblage of products. Today, environmental discourse revolves around the ever-growing Waste that consumes Mother Earth. Waste has also been a descriptor of the female body, which takes up space and uses resources. Simultaneously, the female body is required to be reproductive and sexually amenable, and hence, available and necessary despite being dubbed as waste. Too often we see these juxtapositions played out in areas like advertising, where reproduction is held at arm's length between the pregnant woman who has given in and the sexually promiscuous taunt body of a call girl who pushes away. Waste is further compartmentalized between these individual subjects as they are acted on by not just other individuals but also the state through what Foucault terms "biopolitics."<sup>5</sup> An individual's body is compacted into multiple objectivities—an object of waste with an object of desire, of sexuality, and so forth within a framework of government control and regulations. I have appropriated this framework of how waste functions in my own work: the female form as an object of waste collides with other objects that are reproduced together again and again as a final product of waste and art. The *reproduction* is a polysemy, referencing Mother Earth, states of the female body, and the print editioning process.

Both of these pieces, *Sunk* and *Wasted*, highlight these systems that categorize the female body through the insertion of human body parts with animals or animal products. There is a disruption of action between the human and the object. Overall, I strive to reevaluate the human body in component parts and add them to a constructed space,<sup>6</sup> indicting the ways such human subjects are established as actors. Such a reconstruction of a human form within a system of being<sup>7</sup> (for these environments are filled with nonhuman actors as well) shows new ways of relating and constructing humanness itself. It brings to mind what art historians call the "Modern Sublime," whereby the individual actor can only fully understand her significance by undergoing an experience beyond her control, concluding her own insignificance against the larger forces of environment.<sup>8</sup> However, in this case "environment" is better replaced with *Mother Earth*.

In the piece *Sunk*, I add two features, a nose and beard, to these floating lanterns or vessel shapes, creating a human body. This recognition of subjecthood is also coded as male, requiring a further acknowledgement of how this male subject responds in this space.<sup>9</sup> The masculinized subject

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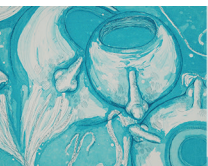
5. "Biopolitics" is defined as the forms of control that the state exerts on its subjects. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).

6. By "component parts," I am referring to the disconnected body parts in each piece that hint at a larger space/environment. "Constructed space" refers to the artificial and fantastical environments that these body parts interact in, which are constructed by the artist.

7. "System of being" is a reshuffling of agents into a new form of relating to each other. Generally, there is a standard hierarchy within this system with man on top and animals, plants, and rocks at the bottom.

8. Mark Rawlinson, "Waste Dominion," "White Warfare," and "Antarctic Modernism," eds. Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, [www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/mark-rawlinson-waste-dominion-white-warfare-and-antarctic-modernism-r1136827](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/mark-rawlinson-waste-dominion-white-warfare-and-antarctic-modernism-r1136827); "The Modern Sublime," in *The Art of the Sublime*, eds. Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, Tate Research Publication, January 2013. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/the-modern-sublime-r1109223>.

9. By "coded, I mean *nose and beard* only operate as a normative punch to the gut to signal maleness.



is dehumanized even as he is recognized and acknowledged because he is a myth, like the character David in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* who struggles to maintain his own "immaculate manhood" while simultaneously playing housewife, homosexual, and object.<sup>10</sup> He is neither a real creation nor one in control of his environment. Even though at first the scene of creating a body that is achieved through beards and large noses takes on a whimsical or even humorous sensation, the larger setting implies a more violent narrative. In this case, the beauty of the space in the piece is created largely through the formal elements of working with the etching technique in printmaking: The hardground that coats the steel and stops the acid from biting into the plate is painted on, with different tonal values occurring through subsequent dippings to create the impression.<sup>11</sup>

The scene within the piece of these masculine vessels being inserted into a space of water is therefore referenced by a larger metadiscursive chain of events via the process of making. It is only as the steel is continually dipped in acid that an image of the body appears. At the same time, the acid, being a liquid environment that can and does cause harm to the human body, must be handled carefully. The violence of the narrative—these male vessels held in water with a breathing apparatus that is not equipped for the environment—illustrates the conclusion of this ecofeminist theory. If women are akin to Mother Earth, men are then counter to Her. But at the same time, I wish to complicate this idea. The male vessels take over this natural water space, but it is unclear whether they share it in a balanced way with the fish pictured in the piece or whether they are destructive. The ambivalence reflects not only a violence and discomfort, but also tears in the bindings of our metaphysical ways of relating.

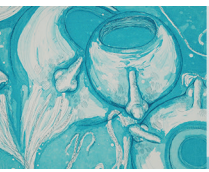
The second piece, *Wasted*, instead of a metadiscursive chain via processes of art making, draws on the movement of semiotics and highlights a larger system of signs that comes together to create a metaphorical space that would not actually occur for a human body.<sup>12</sup> All of the elements are controlled by time. Time restricts the motion of the agents and objects—as a body waits for digestion and excretion, water leaks slowly, and meat ages and rots. Elements like the female legs sitting on a toilet produce a fictional human body in our minds, creating time that exists for the body and a hidden subject. At the same time, fluids drip from the toilet, water sprays onto the page, and a million fluids coalesce. A martini glass below the toilet not only indexes the title in a humorous way, but counters the creation of time just as intoxication causes a muddling of it. As Jean-Luc Nancy humorously quotes Baudelaire at the beginning of his book *Intoxication*, "You must be drunk always. That

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10. James A. Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

11. Hardground is a material used in the etching process in printmaking that forms a protective layer over the metal plate so that the acid, when the plate is dipped, cannot react with it. Ultimately, it causes a darker tonal value or line.

12. "It is true that objects, images, and patterns of behaviour can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture. Where there is a visual substance, for example, the meaning is confirmed by being duplicated in a linguistic message (which happens in the case of the cinema, advertising, comic strips, press photography, etc.) so that at least a part of the iconic message is, in terms of structural relationship, either redundant or taken up by the linguistic system. For collections of objects (clothes, food), they enjoy the status of systems only in so far as they pass through the relay of language, which extracts their signifiers (in the form of nomenclature) and names their signifieds (in the forms of usages or reasons): we are, much more than in former times, and despite the spread of pictorial illustration, a civilization of the written word." Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, 19th ed. (New York: Atlantic Books, 1997), 10.



is everything: the only question. Not to feel the horrible burden of Time that crushes your shoulders and bends you earthward, you must be drunk without respite.”<sup>13</sup>

As Nancy explores in the next 50 pages, the pairing of intoxication and poetry, does it not also make sense to explore the pairing of intoxication and visual art? The mechanical creation, here again, is reminiscent of the continuous dipping of metal into acid, but with a key difference from the last piece. Here, the tonal values were created first, before the linework, and stand at the forefront of the piece. There is an overall feeling, even in the creation of intoxication, and a brazenness as each object is defined. Time is also called into consideration through the animal products like the fish, rotting with time. Aged meats, growing more flavorful with time. Finally, animal tails, pointing not directly to time but to the system of waste that here is linked to time. The animal’s tail is a paradox because it is thrown out as a piece of meat in the normalized ways of dining here in the United States, but is also sought-after purely for sport or decoration: both sides of these human endeavors using or disusing the tail. But the waste produced by the body via the toilet, or the idea of intoxication being linked to being “wasted,” or the meat and fish rotted or in excess: all constitute waste. Finally, the body is also incorporated into this system of waste by being gendered as female and therefore wasteful: wasteful by not being reproductive and having menstrual cycles every month instead of a child, taking up space in a society that sees her as excessive when not sexual, and consuming resources that could be better spent on male bodies to create capital. As anthropologists like Miyako Inoue highlight, even the rationale of spending resources on women historically was borne out in ways to better accomplish the male body and male intellect in different parts of the world.<sup>14</sup>

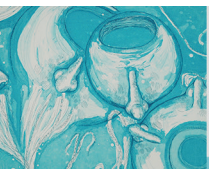
What I hope these two pieces bring to the ever-evolving discourse of ecofeminism is new understanding of the way the dismembered body can be understood through printmaking. As the mechanical motions of editioning, rolling, inking, dipping in acid, and so forth all come together to create these pieces, they act as mechanical forms of creating. This juxtaposition with the way bodies are handled when paired with industry – so often embodied by the destruction of the body, its replacement, and its dismemberment – help us to understand creative landscapes or whimsical environments within a piece of art. Furthermore, these mechanical motions extend to the formation of the human body as a projection of what few features are actually inscribed in the pieces. As I began this essay, I spoke of all the things Mother Earth had become – an idealized woman that was romanticized in Her abuse. What I want my own work to provide is a Mother Earth that is not this, but a system of relations.

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13. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Intoxication*, trans. Philip Armstrong (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016).

14. Miyako Inoue, “Introduction,” and “An Echo of National Modernity: Overhearing ‘Schoolgirl Speech,’” from *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 1–20, 37–74.





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